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ABSTRACT

This study investigated whether there is a difference in the number of toys that male and female parents assign as appropriate for a particular gender. It was expected that fathers would be more restrictive in their categorization of toys to one gender or the other. A measure of gender typing of toys or play behaviors was sent to both parents of 446 elementary school children, of which 172 were returned: 51 from fathers, 121 from mothers. Responses indicated that males and females differed little when categorizing toys and activities as intended for boys or either gender, but many more males than females categorized toys as intended only for girls. This finding supports the hypothesis that male parents are more restrictive in their categorization of toys and play behaviors. (Contains 11 references.) (Author/HTH)

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Parental Gender Typing of Toys and Play Behaviors

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Abstract

The purpose of this research was to investigate whether there is a difference in the number of toys that male and female parents assign as appropriate for a particular gender. Differential treatment of children by parents has been widely studied (Campagnola, 1995; Fivush, Brotman, Buckner, & Goodman, 2000; Rothbart & Maccoby, 1966). Campagnola (1995) found that fathers encouraged more gender appropriate play in both girls and boys. Therefore, it was expected that fathers would be more restrictive in their categorization of toys to one gender or the other.

In this study two instruments were sent to both parents of 446 elementary school children (172 were returned; Male = 51, Female = 121). One instrument, which measured gender typing of toys or play behaviors, and its results are described here. Mann-Whitney *U* analysis revealed that males (n = 51) and females (n = 121) differed little when categorizing toys and activities as intended for boys (z = -0.365, p = .72) or either gender (z = -0.178, p = .86), but many more males than females categorized toys as only intended for girls (z = -2.348, p < .019). This supports the hypothesis that male parents are more restrictive in their categorization of toys and play behaviors, which seems to be primarily attributable to gender typing of girl-only toys and behaviors.

Parental Gender Typing of Toys and Play Behaviors

A flash of pink, you just passed the Barbie aisle; the hot wheels aisle goes by in a streak of blue. Everywhere we look, from catalog pages to TV commercials, toys have somehow managed to acquire the animal trait of gender. It makes one wonder how these toys came to have gender. To research this question, we begin by examining the vast amount of research which attempts to explain how children acquire gender roles (Antill, 1987; Burge, 1981; Fagot & Leinbach, 1995; Raag & Rackliff, 1998). Further investigation leads us to the effects of gender role attitudes on parenting behavior including the differential treatment of children by parents (Campagnola, 1995; Fivush, Brotman, Buckner, & Goodman, 2000; Rothbart & Maccoby, 1966), and the effects of parental gender stereotypes on the types of play behaviors in which their children engage and the types of toys with which they play (Lindsey, Mize, & Pettit, 1997; Raag & Rackliff, 1998; Raag, 1999).

Both cognitive and behavioral theorists have offered propositions for the method by which children acquire gender roles. Social learning theories, based upon the 1963 work of Albert Bandura, suggest that children acquire their gender behaviors by modeling behaviors of their same sexed parents and peers. Another behavior theory, operant conditioning, offers the explanation that children learn specific behaviors based upon the positive or negative reinforcement that is given for these behaviors (as cited by Dworetzky, 1997). In 1966, Kohlberg proposed a cognitive component at work in the process of gender role acquisition. Cognitive theories suggest that children will not begin to demonstrate any gender-typed characteristics until they are old enough to have a cognitive understanding of what it means to be a girl or boy (as cited by Dworetzky, 1997). However, researchers have realized that any of these theories, within themselves, are insufficient explanations for gender role acquisition. The gender schema theory, proposed by Bem in 1981, has been the most influential integration theory, suggesting that children acquire environmental input and then organize it schematically by categorizing this information as best they can (Dworetzky, 1997; Fagot & Leinbach, 1989).

Many studies have stressed the importance of modeling as a necessary precursor to a child's development of a specific gender role, specifically the extent to which parents

incorporate their own beliefs and values into their child-rearing practices (Antill, 1987; Burge, 1981; Fagot & Leinbach, 1989). In 1981, Burge investigated the correlation between parents' scores on a sex role attitude scale and a child rearing sex-role attitude scale that she developed for the study. She found a significant positive correlation between an individual's score on an adult sex-role scale and his/her score on the child rearing scale. Fagot and Leinbach (1989) looked at the relationships between parental stereotypes and young children's gender schema. A longitudinal study was performed which assessed children's ability to label gender at 18 months (before labeling ability), at 27 months (considered early labeling), and at 4 years to determine if early labelers scored higher on a sex role discrimination scale. Parental gender-role stereotypes were assessed using a variety of measures, and results showed that parents with more traditional views had a higher percentage of children who were early labelers. Early labelers were also more aware of cultural stereotypes at the age of four. Boys and girls who were early labelers spent a significantly greater amount of time playing with gender-appropriate toys than average labelers did. Fagot and Leinbach extended this study in 1995 to include more analyses of egalitarian families in which both parents encourage gender equality in all areas of their children's lives. They found that children from egalitarian families acquired gender labels later and demonstrated less gender-role knowledge at the age of four. Egalitarian fathers were more liberal, more open to women's rights and female equality, than their traditional counterparts. On average, fathers in the egalitarian setting spent more time with their children and were more positive in their parent-child interactions. Fagot and Leinbach made the observation that it is the fathers who are different in these family settings; the mothers are very much the same across both types of households. Antill (1987) compared several variables linked to child-rearing practices, such as parents' belief systems, traditional vs. egalitarian gender-role values, background and personality. He found that the strongest predictor of child-rearing practices was traditional vs. egalitarian values, where traditional values emphasized the importance of separate roles and rules for each gender, and egalitarian values emphasized the importance of gender equality in all areas.

Differential treatment of children by parents has been widely studied, and the results have been very enlightening (Campagnola, 1995; Fivush, Brotman, Buckner, &

Goodman, 2000; Rothbart & Maccoby, 1966). Rothbart and Maccoby (1966) demonstrated that parents react to their children based upon their own gender and the gender of their children. Their results suggested that fathers are more permissive with a daughter's undesirable behavior, while mothers are more permissive with a sons'. This was one of the earlier studies suggesting that the gender of the parent is partially responsible for the differential treatment of children. Campagnola (1995) investigated sex-differentiated parent-child interactions using, as his subjects, the parents of one-year-old opposite-sex twins. In his observational study, he found that mothers and fathers inhibited their sons more than their daughters. Fathers encouraged more gender appropriate play in both girls and boys, while mothers encouraged more neutral play in their sons than they did in their daughters. One of the most recent research ventures into the area of differential treatment deals with gender differences in parent-child emotional conversation. Parents were asked to converse with their child about four past events when the child felt emotion (e.g., remember when we saw the fireworks and you were scared?). Conversations were assessed by the number of emotional terms used by the parent and the level of interpersonal communication between parent and child. Mother-child conversations were longer, and mothers discussed more emotion and causes of the emotion with both sons and daughters. However, both parents used fewer emotion words and more autonomous, or impersonal, themes when conversing with sons, than when they were conversing with daughters (Fivush et al., 2000). These studies support a picture of differing parent reactions to sons and daughters.

Parental gender stereotypes have also been shown to affect the types of play in which their children engage and the types of toys with which they play. A recent study involving the differential play patterns of mothers and fathers investigated discrepancies that exist in parents' and children's engaging of pretense or physical play. Girls were found to engage in more pretense play, while boys were more involved in physical play. However, boys were found to participate in pretense play more frequently in the company of their mothers than in the presence of fathers, and fathers and sons were more likely to engage in physical play than any other parent-child dyad. The results of this study imply that children may adjust their behavior to the parent with whom they are interacting (Lindsey, Mize, & Pettit, 1997). Other studies have linked a child's

awareness of social expectation to their subsequent toy choices (Raag & Rackliff, 1998; Raag, 1999). In a study by Raag and Rackliff (1998), preschoolers were presented with toy dishes and toy tools, presented both neutrally and as gender-typed, as options for play in a ten-minute observation period. The playtime was followed by a short interview in which the children were asked if they liked the toys, and if there was anyone they knew that would think that cross-gender toy play was bad. The results indicated that all children with a familiar person who was perceived as believing cross-gender play was bad spent less time playing with the toys associated with the opposite gender. However, the results showed that there were many more boys who believed that their fathers would think that cross-gender play was bad, and that these boys would not play at all with the toys that were gender-typed, even though they reported liking the toys. In 1999, Raag replicated this study and took it a step further, investigating whether children who had familiar people who considered cross-gender play as bad would be influenced in their toy choices by gender information unrelated to the toy choices. As these children entered the observation area, a researcher showed them two sets of clothes, one pink, which they were told was for a girl and one blue, which they were told was for a boy. This information was found to have an effect only on boys who thought that a parent or social contact felt that cross-gender play was bad. These boys avoided toys that were associated with feminine gender information even if the toys were not feminine. It is also interesting to note that in both studies, children who felt that their familiar people thought cross-gender play was either good or didn't matter played equally with both sets of toys.

Review of pertinent literature supports the theory that parents have different expectations for the attitudes and behaviors of their sons and daughters. Several studies suggest that fathers tend to incorporate more traditional gender role values into their parenting behavior than mothers do. Therefore, it is hypothesized that fathers will be more restrictive in their categorization of toys to one gender or the other.

Method

Subjects

The participants for this research were 172 parents, 121 mothers and 51 fathers, of children in an elementary school in eastern Tennessee. Forty-seven percent of the respondents answered as parents of boys, and 53%, the parents of girls. The number of

parents who had children of both genders is unknown. It is not known whether any of the respondents were married couples. Parent ages ranged from 18 to 67, with a mean of 37.31 years, and the child ages ranged from 5 to 13, with a mean of 8.31 years. The parents were asked to complete a parent gender-role attitude scale and a gender appropriate toy list, and then return it to the school, thus participation was on a completely voluntary basis. Participants were not required to submit any identifying demographic information, and as such their confidentiality is guaranteed. The research protocol was approved by the university Institutional Review Board with which the authors were affiliated. There was no evident risk for participants and they were not compensated for their participation.

Instrumentation

The measure used for this study was simply a list of 40 toys or play behaviors, again 15 girl items, 15 boy items, and 10 neutral items (The Toy and Play Gender Classification, TPGC). Parents were asked to indicate whether they believe that the toy or play behavior mentioned is intended for boys, girls, or either gender. The word intended was used to determine how parents actually felt about the assignment of toys to a particular gender by society. It was felt that this would allow parents to be more open with their true feelings about the gender appropriateness of certain toys. A raw score was collected on this survey by simply counting the number of items that the parent assigned to either gender, even if it was opposite of what was expected, and this raw score was correlated with the parents' scores on the attitude scale. Possible raw scores ranged from zero to 40. Again, the items were arranged so that an even number of boy, girl, and neutral items occupy both odd and even spaces, and a split-half reliability coefficient was determined to test the reliability of the instrument. Reliability for this instrument showed a very strong positive correlation, $r = .926$. Construct validity is again evident due to the supporting literature that states parents expect children to play with different types of toys (Lindsey et al., 1997; Raag & Rackliff, 1998; Raag, 1999). Face validity is achieved because all of the items are normal toys and play behaviors that parents and society would generally rate as intended for boys, girls, or either gender, as evidenced by the placement of these toys in catalog pages and toy sections

in department stores, as well as the children used to demonstrate these items in advertisements.

For this survey, a variety of scores was calculated. In addition to the odd and even scores obtained to determine reliability, scores were also calculated on the boy items, girl items, neutral items, and of course, a total score. These scores were calculated to determine if there were any differences, or other relationships, in parents' attitudes toward cross gender behavior for sons and daughters.

Procedure

Two surveys were distributed to each of 446 students in grades K-6 at an elementary school in eastern Tennessee. Teachers passed out the surveys to each student and gave them instructions to take the surveys home to either parents or other guardians. Students were urged to encourage both parents to complete the surveys in hopes of obtaining relatively equal numbers of male and female respondents. A cover letter was attached explaining what information was requested, the lack of risks or benefits involved in completing the survey, and a guarantee of anonymity. Parents were asked to return the completed surveys to the school within a one week time period, where they were collected by teachers and given to the school office. Out of 892 surveys distributed, 172 surveys with complete information were returned. Seven additional surveys were returned and discarded due to the absence of pertinent information or obvious misinformation.

Results

The range of scores on the TPGC for this sample was zero to 33 with a mean of 15.97 (the lower the score, the more egalitarian the view with regard to gender). A Mann-Whitney U was calculated for scores on the TPGC using parent gender as the grouping variable. Mann-Whitney *U* analysis revealed that males (n = 51) and females (n = 121) differed little when categorizing toys and activities as intended for boys (Male *M* rank = 84.37, Female *M* rank = 87.40; z = -0.365, p = .72) or either gender (Male *M* rank = 85.55, Female *M* rank = 86.90; z = -0.178, p = .86), but many more males than females categorized toys as only intended for girls (Male *M* rank = 100.15, Female *M* rank = 80.75; z = -2.348, p < .02). Although the difference between parents of each gender did not reach significance using a Bonferroni Correction, the trend in scores is

quite apparent in Table 2. Fathers were far more likely to classify toys as "girl toys" than mothers were, and neither parent classified that many as "boy toys."

Discussion

Both mothers and fathers assigned a significantly greater number of girl toys as being exclusively for girls, than boy toys as just for boys. This finding supports existing literature (Raag & Rackliff, 1998; Raag, 1999) and the hypothesis that parents consider cross gender behavior to be more acceptable for girls than for boys. In regard to the second hypothesis, although the analysis for fathers was not significant with the Bonferroni correction, it is apparent form the differences between fathers and mothers scores, that fathers do indeed restrict more toys as strictly for girls. This finding again supports literature documenting the traditional gender role that the father expects his child to adopt (Antill, 1987; Burge, 1981; Fagot & Leinbach, 1989).

One limitation of this study has to do with the male response rate. Approximately three times as many mothers as fathers completed and returned the survey. A larger sample of male respondents could have altered the findings. A second limitation concerns the number of responses received. Although 172 surveys constitute a rather large sample, this was only a 20% response rate. It is possible that the parents who did not return the survey had viewpoints that were significantly different from those who did return the survey. The third limitation of this study is the use of a new, unpiloted questionnaire for the assessment of the parents. Although this instrument yielded high split-half correlation, further correlation with established scales and re-testing with this same scale would greatly strengthen the reliability and validity of this instrument. Another weakness in this study was the use of convenience sampling. All parents were parents of children at the same school, living in the same geographic area. Which brings us to the last limitation that could have an effect on this study, the area of the country from which this sample was recruited. This study was conducted in a small rural community in the South, where traditional values have been shown to be stronger and more rigid than in other areas of the country, especially traditional values regarding the roles of men and women (Ellison & Musick, 1993). Although this research has been fairly consistent with results from past investigations (Burge, 1981; Campagnola, 1995; Fagot & Leinbach, 1989; Fivush et al.), generalizability is limited.

Prior to this study, the differences between mothers' and fathers' gender role attitudes in parenting have been very well established (Antill, 1987; Campagnola, 1995; Fagot & Leinbach, 1989; Fivush et al., 2000. Additionally, these attitudes have also been examined in relation to the types of toys with which their children play and play behaviors that they exhibit (Lindsey, Mize, & Pettit, 1997; Raag & Rackliff, 1998; Raag, 1999). The current study serves to strengthen the existing research, and to initiate future research of the benefits of gender equitable play, looking at the relationship between gender unrestricted play and a child's sense of well being.

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Table 1: Toy List Survey

Boy Items	Girl Items	Neutral Items
Toy Guns	Baby Dolls	Pretend Play
Tool Set	Dress-up	Bicycles
Matchbox Cars	Toy Dishes	Art Supplies
Army Figures	Barbie Dolls	Stuffed Animals
Super Heroes	Kitchen Set	Roller Skates
R. C. Vehicles	Toy Furniture	Jump Rope
Toy Swords	Little Mermaid Toys	Hopscotch
Race Tracks	Slumber Parties	Castle Play set
Basketball	Toy Vanity	Karaoke Machine
Pirate Ship Play set	Baby Stroller	Sand Box
Detective Kit	Body Glitter	
Building Blocks	Stationary Set	
Drums	Diary	
Baseball & Bat	Sewing Machine	
Buzz Lightyear	Flute	

Table 2

Mann-Whitney Test

Ranks

	PGENDER	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
TLBOY	Male	51	84.37	4303.00
	Female	121	87.40	10575.00
	Total	172		
TLGIRL	Male	51	100.15	5107.50
	Female	121	80.75	9770.50
	Total	172		
TLNEUTRA	Male	51	85.55	4363.00
	Female	121	86.90	10515.00
	Total	172		

Test Statistics

	TLBOY	TLGIRL	TLNEUTRA
Mann-Whitney U	2977.000	2389.500	3037.000
Wilcoxon W	4303.000	9770.500	4363.000
Z	-.365	-2.348	-.178
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.715	.019	.859

a Grouping Variable: PGENDER

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